

Forgiveness has healed Kim Phuc's heart

Local News

By Erica Bajer

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RIDGETOWN — Forgiveness hasn't healed Kim Phuc's physical scars, but it has healed her spirit.

"In order to be free, I had to learn to forgive," Phuc told more than 1,000 people Sunday at Ridgetown College.

She was the keynote speaker during The Gathering 2010, a unity service hosted by the churches of Ridgetown and area.

Most people wouldn't recognize Phuc today — but just about everybody has seen her picture.

The famous photograph shows Phuc running naked and crying, her skin on fire with napalm, down a road after an attack on her Vietnamese village of Trang Bang in 1972.

The picture, taken by Pulitzer Prize winning AP photographer Huyng Cong Nick Ut, became a symbol of civilian suffering in the Vietnam War.

"That image touched people's hearts," Phuc said.

She urged those gathered to see the picture of her most painful moment in a different way.

"Don't see her as crying out in pain and fear, see her as crying out for peace," she said.

Phuc was a happy nine-year-old who knew nothing about war on June 8, 1972.

That all changed when her village near Saigon was bombed. She remembers seeing four napalm bombs drop from the sky.

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"My clothes were burned off, my skin was on fire," Phuc said. "When the four bombs fell, I was in the middle. I should have died with the hit of the napalm."

People wept in the audience as she showed footage taken directly after the bombing. The children running and screaming in the video are Phuc's siblings and cousins.

They didn't all survive.

"That day changed my life forever," Phuc said.

She was put in the morgue, where for three days she clung to life before her mother came to retrieve her body.

Finding her alive was a miracle.

Phuc spent the next 14 months in a burn clinic and has undergone 17 operations.

She was re-victimized after the war by the Vietnamese government, which exploited her in its propaganda, making her a "national symbol of war."

She was heavily supervised and her studies to become a doctor were cut short.

"My life became a bird in a cage," she recalled. "I felt so bitter and angry. I cursed those who had hurt me."

Phuc was consumed by her anger and knew something had to change.

"I had to change my heart or die from hatred," she said.

At 19, Phuc said she read the Bible and became a Christian.

"I knew God had a purpose for my life," she said.

In 1986 Phuc moved to Cuba to study. She defected to Canada in 1992 with her husband.

"We had nothing but faith," she said, noting she lives in Ajax and is proud to be a Canadian.

Phuc admits that forgiving the people who hurt her was a long and challenging road.

"I had to pray and I prayed a lot," she said. "I started to put all the names of the people who caused my suffering on my prayer list . . . my heart became softer."

Phuc said she accepts what happened to her and has no more hatred in her heart.

She is now filled with joy, mercy and compassion.

"My life should show you that forgiveness is more powerful than any weapon of war," she said.

Following her talk, Phuc said she hopes people will be inspired by her story — inspired to forgive and live with hope and love.

She said if there was more love and forgiveness in the world, tragedies like what happened to her and her village would be prevented.

Michael Lawless, of Rodney, said Phuc's story is powerful and a reality check of sorts.

"It makes you sit back and say 'Wow, we should be thankful for what we have,'" he said. "It's pretty awe-inspiring.

"It's a story of forgiveness and overcoming adversity."

Sherrie Williams, of Ridgetown, was moved to action by Phuc's story.

Following the service, she sponsored a child through the International Needs Network, which the Kim Phuc Foundation works alongside.

"Everyone's on a journey and we need to look at where we are in our lives," she said of what she learned through Phuc's story.

"It puts everything in perspective. It gives so much inspiration for those of us who have been through things.

"Just seeing her so joyful now . . . gives you hope."

ebajer@chathamdailynews.ca

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